

Parallels and Distinctions in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* and "Orpheus and Eurydice"

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Abstract

Criticism of Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* alongside the Greek mythological story of "Orpheus and Eurydice" has usually been an engagement in drawing parallels between both texts, or of uncovering symbols and allusions found within the novel that echoes the Greek myth. None, however, has explored at the same time the range of similarities and dissimilarities between both narratives; nor is there available a sustained attention devoted to the criticism of both. This study fills that critical vacuum. The question thus opened up is that there are convergences as well as divergences in the narratives; and although *Season of Anomy* is not without borrowings from the Greek mythology which constitutes the convergences and to some extent informs some of the divergences, the novel's trajectory and imaginative framework transcend the classical story. Julia Kristeva's notion of the figure of "double destinations" under her theory of intertextuality is brought into play in this study to make sense of the parities and disparities between both accounts.

Keywords: Convergence, Divergence, Double Destinations, Intertextuality, Symbols, Allusions

1. Introduction

Existing criticism of Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1994) together with the Greek mythology of "Orpheus and Eurydice" are preoccupied with uncovering affinities, symbols, and allusions in both narratives. Augustin C. Okere (1995), for instance, exercises the thinking in an article that "Apart from the conglomerates of allusions which radiate from the Orpheus-Eurydice (Ofeyi-Iriyise) myth, there are, in *Season of Anomy*, specific allusions and symbols" (p.38). Similarly, according to Anjah Roy and Viney Kirpal (1991) in an article: "Perhaps, Soyinka resorted to the better-known Greek tale of Orpheus' quest for his lost wife Eurydice in his second novel *Season of Anomy* to overcome the obscurity posed by the deeply Yoruba reference of his earlier work" (p.523). Czarny Pies (2017), for his own part, writes of *Season of Anomy* thus: "The hero Ofeyi (Orpheus) travels through the hell of Nigeria in search of his wife Iriyise (Eurydice) visiting the cadaver filled sites of many places where civilian massacres have occurred" (Pies, 2017, "Czarny Pies's Review of *Season of Anomy*", para. 1). This viewpoint of similarity between both stories is also expressed by Ikenna Dieke (1993) where he holds that, "In the novel, Soyinka renames Eurydice Iriyise..." (p.33). Further, Dieke (1993) pursues a symbolism within the novel that is analogous to the Greek legend, saying: "In the novel, the use of the orphic myth enables Soyinka to effect a kind of imaginative transformation of the mythos of the female from the phantom-lady to the Eurydice-Persephone figure" (p.33). But the question of affinities, or of symbolisms or allusions, in all their forms, need not detain one from recognizing that the

novel's trajectory goes beyond the Greek mythology. This much is corroborated by Akwanya (2015) in an article which prosecutes the argument that,

An early foray away from the moulds prevalent in discussions of African literature is the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Undoubtedly there is more to this than mere echo effect from the names of Ofeyi and Iriyise. But that legend is too narrow a platform and does not extend beyond the Temoko passage. So it can hardly indicate a purpose and structure of meaning echoing throughout the whole work and comprehending its length and breadth. (p.8)

Indeed, the argument which Akwanya advances here, and rightly so, is that the affinities which *Season of Anomy* has with "Orpheus and Eurydice" go beyond the sound effect in the names of Ofeyi and Orpheus; Iriyise and Eurydice respectively. However, as he sees it, the classical legend is too small and does not stretch past the Temoko passage in the novel, and so it can scarcely constitute the architecture of meaning of the novel. For Soyinka's text is preoccupied with the socio-political uprisings as well as the political turbulences of Nigeria in the 1960s.

As such, this paper is devoted to exploring the convergences and divergences between Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* and the classical tale of "Orpheus and Eurydice", a thing which has not received sustained attention in the criticism of both narratives. To accomplish this task, therefore, a mythological image of the figure of "double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p.43) will be put to use in order to make sense of this double analogy of likeness and differentness. The figure of "double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p.43) is really what is recognizably known as irreconcilable dyads in Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality. In other words, the figure of "double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p.43) is something which is capable of being "doubly interpreted or have double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p.43). And it, the mythological image, features proper to this study in that portions of Soyinka's novel will be interpreted as having affinities with the classical narrative whereas other portions of the accounts will be interpreted as charting different trajectories.

2. Points of Convergence

There are a myriad of ways in which Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1994) and the Greek mythological story of "Orpheus and Eurydice" converge as well as diverge. However, following a certain whim not removed from proportion, the task is divided into a sizeable amount beginning with the symmetrical aspect, namely, and first: there is the intertwining theme of a firm rejection to resign oneself to the tragic fate of a loved one as opposed to the determined effort to save the dear one in both texts. Contextually, in the Greek myth, when Eurydice dies, Orpheus resolves to seek out his wife by going to the land of the dead to beg for her to be restored back to life and even when he fails to achieve this, he, again unsuccessfully, attempts to return to the Underworld. In similar fashion, Ofeyi in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* journeys to Cross-river and specifically to the interior of Temoko prison to save his love, Iriyise.

Further, there is powerful love between Orpheus and Eurydice in the Greek myth as there is between Ofeyi and Iriyise in *Season of Anomy*. On the one hand, this is manifest where the story says that when Eurydice died from a snake bite, "Orpheus sang his grief with his lyre and managed to move everything living or not on the world; both humans and Gods were deeply touched by his sorrow and grief" ("Orpheus and Eurydice", n.d., para.5). On the other hand, one of the ample illustrations of the strong love between Ofeyi and Iriyise in *Season of Anomy* can be located in the love scene between the lovers where the novelist narrates thus: "He pressed her backwards onto the bed by the wrists and pressed her down with his weight. ...Their mingled sweat soaked the sheets and she clawed as he sank into her" (Soyinka, 1994, p. 303). Clearly, as described, the coital position of the lovers, together with their mixed sweat, speaks to strong love.

There is also the journey or quest motif in both narratives. In "Orpheus and Eurydice", Orpheus goes to the Underworld (the land of the dead) looking to revive his lost love. Ofeyi does a similar thing in *Season of Anomy* by travelling to lethal Cross-river to rescue his lover. In Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, a theory which she espouses in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), there is a notion of the figure of "double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p.43) which is really a mythological image. By this mythological image, or, more appropriately, the figure of "double destinations" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 43), it is meant something which could be "doubly interpreted" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 43). Carrying from that, therefore, *Season of Anomy* could be interpreted in two ways; first, due to the look-alike brush strokes on its canvass, thereby constituting the affinities it shares with the Greek legend and, second, by reason of the novel's points of departures from the Greek tale. On the one hand, a reason which accounts for the fact that Soyinka's novel has similarities with the classical narrative is that a basic component which powers his writings is Soyinka's conscious allusion to Greek mythology or to its tragedy as exemplified in the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and in the critical work, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. There is, then, no doubt at all that his novel too, *Season of Anomy*, owes a significant portion to the Greek myth of "Orpheus and Eurydice". On the other hand, *Season of Anomy* is dissimilar to the classical tale on account of its preoccupation with the political upheavals and anomalies of the 1960s leading up to the mass massacres of Igbos.

There are, in addition, subtle similarities of sound in the names of Orpheus and Ofeyi; Eurydice and Iriyise; and in the names of Cerberus and Suberu in the Greek narrative and in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* respectively. Surely, one is utterly mistaken who thinks that this is merely coincidence. For, if there are several cases of subtle parities of sounds in these names within the novel, a plan has certainly been hatched. No! This is not coincidence, but Soyinka's deliberate allusion to the Greek myth in question.

In the ancient Greek story, Pluto, God of the Underworld, and Orpheus appear to make a pact to release Eurydice to Orpheus on a condition to be fulfilled by the latter but it turns out to be a trick in much the same way as the Governor of Temoko prison, S.S Karaun, seems at first to be in agreement with Ofeyi to release Iriyise to him but it plays out to be a deception. In fact, the ancient Greek narrative sets forth the information that when Orpheus descended to the land of the dead and pleaded with Pluto to return Eurydice to him alive, the condition given him was that “Eurydice would follow him while walking out to the light from the caves of the Underworld, but he should not look backward at her before coming out to the light because he would lose her forever” (“Orpheus and Eurydice”, n.d., para.7). However, imbued with feelings of love and an ardent desire to be reunited with his beloved, Orpheus looked at Eurydice, thereby losing her forever. (It is tempting to note here in passing that this portion of the Greek myth hints at the biblical story in Genesis 19 of Lot and his family fleeing the immoral and destruction-prone city of Sodom and Gomorrah upon Jehovah’s instructions and the failure of Lot’s wife to obey the instructions through and through when she looked back at the now burning city and it cost her life). In Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, this guile is undeniably present in a scene within Temoko prison towards the end of the novel where Ofeyi is in a bid to find his lover and S.S Karaun who appears initially to lead him to her is later clearly disinclined to. Consequently, he attempts to deflect Ofeyi’s attention from his objective, as evidenced by the shift in his comments to Ofeyi as they converse:

‘Where exactly are you taking me? Inside or outside these walls?’ ‘You seem to know the geography of the place better than I’, Karaun mocked. ‘You know where the clinic is, where the fugitives are housed, you seem to know the place better than I’. Ofeyi began to speak but he silenced him. ‘Listen to that!’ (Soyinka, 1994, p. 538)

In fact, this duplicity is starker where Ofeyi exercises the thought that Iriyise is dead, although she is actually in a coma following the prisoners’ riot, and then accuses the Governor of being responsible and though Karaun is correct in replying that she is not dead, he totally denies having a hand in the woman’s condition. But if not him, then who? The rioting prisoners? Who imprisoned Iriyise? Suberu? Who does Suberu work for?

The sixth and last of the striking similarities between both narratives isolated in this paper is that in “Orpheus and Eurydice” as in *Season of Anomy*, Orpheus and Ofeyi encounter horrible sights respectively. Textual references to this point find expression where Orpheus is said to have gone to the Underworld “and arrived at the infamous Stygian realm, passing by ghosts and souls of people unknown” (“Orpheus and Eurydice”, n.d., para.5). In the fictive world of Soyinka’s novel, horrible sights abound. Of particular mention here is where Ofeyi’s search for Iriyise leads him and Zaccheus to the mortuary at which they come upon a pile of dead bodies of a family, causing Ofeyi’s partner to scream. As it is narrated:

They resumed their progress through the trolleys and concrete slabs, stopped involuntarily at a family group. At least so they interpreted the pile — a father, a mother, three grown boys and a six-month pair of twins. The man and the eldest of the boys were badly charred, the others unmarked. Yellow ointment seeped through thick bandages on the eldest boy. A strangled cry came from Zaccheus: ‘Look at that!’ (p. 458)

Needless to say, it is the cannibalistic killings of people in Cross-river that occasions this tragic and pathetic reality. Indeed, horrible sights pervade much of Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*.

3. Points of Divergence

With regard to the contrasting features between both texts, some of them are: first, “Orpheus and Eurydice” is through and through a love story while Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* is unmistakable in its relentless horrific portrayal and strong disapproval of the socio-political upheavals of Nigeria in the 1960s that led to the mass massacre of Igbos in the North and subsequently to the Nigerian Civil War. In the Greek narrative, this is first noticeable where it is written that “Orpheus fell in love with Eurydice a woman of unique beauty; they got married and lived happily for many years” (“Orpheus and Eurydice”, n.d., para.3). But Soyinka’s tale is, at bottom, one of oppression and violence and it is replete with pictorial depictions of whole-sale wastefulness of human lives. True, the love between Ofeyi and Iriyise is given a prominent place in the novel. But this acts, among other things, as a lever through which the reader witnesses by following Ofeyi on his rescue mission to the bloodbath in Cross-river, a representation of Northern Nigeria of the 1960s. For instance, in Soyinka’s fiction an infinitely sad portrait of the slaughter of Christians worshipping on a Sunday in a place called Kuntua in Cross-river is painted thus:

Mutilations followed death, sometimes preceded actual death. The women came out in a body, slowly, holding their children by the hand. They stood outside, a few yards from the burning temple. They waited. Conspicuous as a shield, a plea or an accusation for the rest was a frail creature nearly overbalanced by the heavy pregnancy that stuck out of her and seemed ready to weigh her to the ground. Ofeyi held his breath, unable to tear his eyes from the confrontation. Until that moment when her head jerked suddenly downwards to stare in surprise at the unnatural blossom that her womb had sprouted. Ofeyi sank to the ground, his back turned to the scream that rose from the paved altar of the Sunday sacrifice. (p. 435)

Soyinka is a Yoruba, not an Igbo. But for him to have written a poem, “Massacre, October ’66”, followed by *Season of Anomy* which reveals his deep humanity towards the downtrodden Igbos as seen in the passage above, one can take pride in the life and work of this great fellow countryman who is deserving of the honour bestowed on him that is the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Second, in the Greek myth, there is a fairly high degree of importance attached to the character of Eurydice as enormous concern for her is limited to only one person, Orpheus. However, in *Season of Anomy* Soyinka's allocation of prominence and status to the character of Iriyise is supremely superlative as all of the community of Aiyero express fervent worry for her absence; as, in fact, she is equated with Aiyero itself. In the Greek tale, this is substantiated by the knowledge that Orpheus mourns the death of his wife and attempts even to bring her back alive from the land of the dead. In the fiction of Soyinka (1994), by contrast, an evidence of this is where Eurydice is kidnapped and the Aiyeros from different walks of life asked the question: "Where is Iridescent?" (p. 296). Another site in the novel where Iriyise is accorded great importance; or, to use the fine phrase of Ikenna Dieke (1993), "Earth-Mother image" (p.37), is situated where it is written: "The forest was cleared, sown Aiyero held her deeper than any bed of eiderdown" (p.254).

Furthermore, in the Greek narrative, one learns of the "three-headed monster" called Cerberus. But, in *Season of Anomy*, Soyinka plays with his own creation of the opposite of Cerberus — both literally and metaphorically — as he imbues Suberu (the literal creation of the opposite character) with "monster qualities" while earlier in the novel referring metaphorically to the four men who oppress the Cartel as the "four-headed beast" (p.366). In detail, the "three-headed monster" Cerberus in the Greek story is not developed. The character is only mentioned as one of those that Orpheus, when he went to Hades or the Underworld, "managed to charm" ("Orpheus and Eurydice", n.d., para.6). However, Soyinka's literal opposite creation of Cerberus is developed, and fully so. For example, the novelist describes Suberu's fingers, palms, "facial muscles", "bunched skin", "foot-glazed furrows", (p.523) body, eyes, and other parts of his body. And, whereas the description is for the most part monstrous, it is also partly a parody of the character of Cerberus in the Orpheus story. With regard to the metaphorical reference to the four oppressors of the Cartel, Soyinka puts it this way: "A basin of oil-lamps and crouching shadows actually sought to disturb the peace of mind and material ease of the four-headed beast that trampled their dignity..." (p.366). The four oppressors of the Cartel, it must be revealed, are Zaki Amuri, Chief Batoki, Chief Biga and their tool, the Commandant-in-Chief.

By the same token, in "Orpheus and Eurydice", the story is laid out for the reader to comprehend with ease, but the language of *Season of Anomy* is highly complex and the fact of Soyinka, having worked symbols and metaphors into his narrative as it were, make the novel all the more complex and therefore very difficult to grasp. Indeed, the language of the Greek tale is easy to understand, as this sample of it shows: "Orpheus was the son of Apollo and Calliope, the Muse. Apollo gave his son a lyre and taught him how to play; Orpheus did to such perfection that even Apollo was surprised. ..." ("Orpheus and Eurydice", n.d., para.2). Nevertheless, as expressed above, Soyinka's use of language in *Season of Anomy* is very hard to make sense of. The following portion of the novel is a neat exemplar:

From a charred, barkless height, a kite rose from its watch-tower and circled the sky, gaining the rarer regions on invisible wind streams. Zaccheus had taken the wheel, Ofeyi leant back and tried to borrow eyes off the kite, scan the distant city for the object of quest. Foiled he turned his gaze on the gorges whose precarious sides sheered into the netherworld, a network of canyons and ridges writhed into a sunset-gory horizon, giant troughs whose linear base seemed pocked by tumours of dislodged boulders. (p.409)

The scene described is the event of Ofeyi and Zaccheus embarking on a journey to Cross-river, during which the nature of the environment by which they drive and their actions on the way are captured. Nonetheless, for one to fully understand it, one needs to refer to the dictionary.

Next, the country in which Orpheus in "Orpheus and Eurydice" lives is called Greece while Ofeyi's own country is unnamed, although there are broad hints here and there that Soyinka's witness in *Season of Anomy* is a throwback to the 1960s in Nigeria. Indeed, Amechi .N. Akwanya (2015) also subscribes to this view that the country of *Season of Anomy* is nameless when he writes in an article that: "The Cartel of powerful individuals who run the unnamed country of *Season of Anomy* are undoubtedly very intelligent men" (p.2). On the one hand, evidence of this in the story is where it is said that Orpheus "was living in Thrace, on the northeastern part of Greece" ("Orpheus and Eurydice", n.d., para.1). On the other hand, a validation that the nameless country of Soyinka's novel is Nigeria can be found where the story reads: "The Lagoon dissolved its daily tribute of camwood" (p.242). The setting established here is most likely Lagos, the reasons being that the term 'Lagoon' is contained in the sentence and that Soyinka is a Nigerian. But proof that Soyinka's fiction is set in 1960s Nigeria lies in its evocative atmosphere, the fact that horrible killings reminiscent of the pogrom against Igbos in the North at the time permeate the novel which was first published in 1973 and that fiction, predominantly, if not totally, harks back to past experiences.

The last point of divergence which this article explores in both texts is that Eurydice in the Greek myth is bitten by a snake; she dies and goes to the Underworld and attempt to save her proves abortive whereas Iriyise in *Season of Anomy* is abducted and taken to the interior of Temoko prison in Cross-river but she is saved. With regard to the first point given here, one can inspect the Greek myth where it is scripted that after Eurydice dies and Orpheus goes to the land of the dead and pleads with the God of the Underworld for the restoration of her life and he is given a condition to fulfil which he fails to, "Eurydice was gone forever" ("Orpheus and Eurydice", n.d., para.9). In contrast, when in *Season of Anomy*, Iriyise is kidnapped and taken to Temoko prison in Cross-river and somehow in the wake of the prisoners' riot becomes comatose and remains in that state till the novel ends, the comment by the authorial voice towards the end of the novel about her condition, that "...Ofeyi must wait, patiently, for her emergence" (p.548) authenticates the fact that she has been saved, she is alive, and she will be fully conscious.

4. Conclusion

With the aid of a dimension of Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, it has been ascertained that Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, fit to be interpreted in two ways, has borrowings as well as differing characteristics from the Greek mythological story of "Orpheus and Eurydice". As it has been made out, some similarities as well as some differences rob off on each other, which is really to say that some differences in Soyinka's text derive from the "Orpheus and Eurydice" story, thereby making them similar but different, a case in point being that of the writer's playful creation of the literal and metaphorical opposite of the character of Cerberus. But beyond the novel's engagement with the Greek myth, *Season of Anomy* is at once a fictional account of oppression and violence directed at Igbos living in the North in 1960s Nigeria that gives prominence to the human attribute of love between Ofeyi and Iriyise. Even so, there are probably other ways in which the novel is similar to, and different from, the classical story which are outside the purview of this paper.

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